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*The Situation of the World at the time of CHRIST'S  
Appearance, and its Connection with the Success  
of his Religion, considered.*

S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE

SOCIETY in SCOTLAND for propagating  
CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE.

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SOCIETY in SCOTLAND for PROPAGATING  
CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE,

AT THE  
Anniversary Meeting in the High Church of Edinburgh,  
On Monday January 6. 1755.

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Principal of the University of Edinburgh.

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UPON

The Situation of the World at the Time of  
CHRIST'S Appearance, &c.

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COLOS. i. 26.

*Even the Mystery, which hath been hid  
from Ages and Generations, but now is  
made manifest to his Saints.*

**T**HERE is no employment more delightful to a devout mind than the contemplation of the divine wisdom in the government of this world. The civil history of mankind opens a wide field for this pious exercise. Careful observers may often,

ten, by the light of reason, form probable conjectures with regard to the plan of God's Providence, and can discover a skilful hand directing the revolutions of human affairs, and compassing the best ends by the most effectual and surprising means : But sacred history, by drawing aside that veil which covers the counsels of the Almighty, lays open his designs to the view of his creatures ; and we can there trace the steps which he taketh towards accomplishing them with more certainty, and greater pleasure. The facts which inspired writers relate are no less instructive than the doctrines which they teach. The latter informs us that God is powerful, and wise, and good ; the former discover those perfections brought forth into action, and confirm speculative opinions, by real and striking examples.

THE publication and establishment of Christianity in the world is a remarkable event of this kind, and contributes greatly to illustrate, as well as to magnify, the divine

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vine power and wisdom. From beginnings the most inconsiderable, and by instruments the most unlikely, the Almighty, with incredible facility, raised that glorious fabric of his church, which hitherto hath withstood all the rage of his enemies, and *the gates of hell*, we believe, *shall not prevail against it* †. According to our Saviour's beautiful image, *The least of all seeds grew up, and waxed a great tree, and spread out its branches, and filled the earth* †. The hand of God sheltered this feeble plant from the storm ; and, by his care, it was reared, and cultivated, and brought to maturity. The wisdom and power of men united to oppose the doctrine of God : But it confounded the former, and overcame the latter. Neither the bigotry of the Jews, nor the superstition of the heathen, could resist its progress ; and in vain *did Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and people of Israel, gather themselves together against the Lord and his Anointed* †.

MANY

\* Math. xvi. 18. † Mark iv. 32. ‡ Acts iv. 27.



MANY circumstances concurred in procuring, for Christianity, such a favourable reception and firm establishment in the world. Whoever reflects upon the situation of mankind at the time when it was published, will find abundant reason to admire the divine wisdom, which disposed these circumstances with so much art, and improved them with such skill and success. The text naturally leads me to consider the conduct and administration of Providence in this particular light. *The word of God, saith the Apostle, the mystery hid from ages, and from generations, is now made manifest to his saints.* Why was the gospel of Christ so long concealed from the world? Why was it published at that time? What do we find in that particular juncture to render the discovery of the Christian religion more necessary, or the propagation of it more successful?

IN the following discourse, I shall endeavour to account for this part of the divine oeconomy, by selecting some remarkable  
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circumstances in the situation of mankind, which prove that God *manifested the mystery of the Gospel* at a time when the world stood most in need of such a revelation, and was best prepared for receiving it.

THE appearance of Christ in so late an age, was an objection raised, by his ancient adversaries, against the truth of his mission; and modern infidels have not failed to revive and to urge it, with their usual confidence and triumph. But, if we can establish the truth of our general proposition, this cavil falls to the ground, and the divine conduct is fully vindicated.

I. ABOUT the time of Christ's appearance, there prevailed a general opinion, that the Almighty would send forth some eminent messenger to communicate a more perfect discovery of his will to mankind. The Supreme Being conducts all his operations by general laws. It seems to be one among these, that no perfection of any kind can be attained of a sudden. The mo-

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tion by which his works advance towards their final and complete state is gradual and progressive. This holds with regard to all the productions in the natural, and all the changes in the moral world. The same principle appears to have regulated the dispensations of religion. The light of revelation was not poured in upon mankind all at once, and with its full splendour. The obscurity of the dawn went before the brightness of the noon-day. The will of God was at first made known by revelations, useful indeed, but dark and mysterious. To these succeeded others more clear and perfect. In proportion as the situation of the world made it necessary, the Almighty was pleased farther to open and unfold his scheme. Men came, by degrees, to understand this progressive plan of Providence, and to conceive how systems temporary and incomplete might serve to introduce that concluding and perfect revelation, which would *declare the whole council of God to man* \*.

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\* Acts xx. 27.

THE dignity of the person employed to publish this revelation, the virtues of his character, the glory of his kingdom, and the signs of his coming, were described by the ancient Prophets with the utmost perspicuity. Guided by this *sure word of prophecy*, the Jews of that age concluded the period, predetermined by God, to be then completed; and that the *fulnness of time* being come, the promised Messiah would suddenly appear. Devout persons among them *waited day and night for the Consolation of Israel* \*; and the whole nation, groaning under the *Roman yoke*, and stimulated by the desire of liberty or of vengeance, expected their deliverer with the most anxious impatience.

NOR were these expectations peculiar to the Jews. By their dispersions among so many nations; by their conversation with the learned men among the Heathens; and by the translation of their inspired writings  
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\* Luke ii. 25, 38.



into a language almost universal ; the principles of their religion were spread all over the East ; and it became the common belief that a Prince would arise at that time in *Judea*, who should change the face of the world, and extend his empire from one end of the earth to the other.

IN this *due time*, did the wisdom of God send forth his Son, not to assume any strange character, or to claim any new and unknown dignity, but to fulfil *all that had been spoken by the mouth of his holy prophets since the world began* \*. While the eyes of men were employed in search of the promised Messiah ; while they watched every sign that could indicate his coming ; and observed every circumstance which could lead them to discover him ; *while the earnest expectation of all creatures waited for the revelation of God* ; at that happy and favourable juncture was the mystery hid from ages manifested to the world. No wonder

\* Acts iii. 21.



wonder the *Jews* should receive our Saviour, on his first appearance, not only without prejudice, but even with eagerness and applause : No wonder the Gentiles should *gather together unto him*, who had so long been *the desire of all nations* \*. Had Christ been manifested at a more early period, the world would not have been prepared to meet him with the same fondness and zeal : Had his appearance been postponed for any considerable time, men's expectations would have begun to languish, and the warmth of desire, from a delay of gratification, might have cooled and died away.

II. BUT, it is not **only** from circumstances peculiar to the **Jews** and neighbouring nations, that we conclude the Christian religion to have been published at the most proper time : We propose to bring a farther confirmation of this truth, from a survey of the condition and circumstances of mankind

\* Gen. xlix. 18. ; Hag. ii. 7.

kind in general. Let us venture then into this large field, and take a view of the political, of the moral, of the religious, and of the domestic state of the world.

WE begin by considering the political state of the world about the time of our Saviour's appearance. The world, in the most early ages, was divided into small independent states, differing from each other in language, manners, laws, and religion. The shock of so many opposite interests, the interfering of so many contrary views, occasioned the most violent convulsions and disorder. Perpetual discord subsisted between these rival states ; hostility and bloodshed never ceased, during that turbulent and restless period. Commerce had not hitherto united mankind, and opened the communication of one nation with another. The world may now be considered as one vast society, closely cemented by mutual wants ; each part contributing its share towards the subsistence, the pleasure, and improvement of the whole. But, in those  
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more simple ages, the intercourse between nations was extremely inconsiderable. Voyages into remote countries, in quest either of wealth or of knowledge, were very rare. Men moved in a narrow circle, little acquainted with any thing beyond the limits of their own small territory, and utter strangers to the condition and character of distant nations.

AT last, the Roman ambition undertook the arduous enterprize of conquering the world, and conducted it with such refined policy, irresistible courage, and inimitable perseverance, as in the end crowned the attempt with success. *They trode down the kingdoms, according to Daniel's prophetic description, and by their exceeding strength they devoured the whole earth* \*. By enslaving the world, however, they civilized it; and, while they oppressed mankind, they united them together. The same laws were every where established, and the same languages

\* Dan. vii. 7. 23.



languages understood. Men approached nearer to one another in sentiments and in manners. The intercourse between the most distant corners of the earth was rendered secure and agreeable. Satiated with victory, the first Emperors abandoned all thoughts of new conquests. Peace, an unknown blessing, was enjoyed throughout all that vast empire ; or, if a slight war was waged on an outlying and barbarous frontier, far from disturbing the tranquillity, it scarcely drew the attention of mankind.

SUCH was the political state of the world when Christianity made its first appearance; and, from this representation of it, many circumstances concur to justify the divine wisdom, in choosing that particular conjuncture for publishing it. During the period, which I first described, the propagation of any new religion must have been extremely slow and uncertain. How could it have forced its way, through innumerable difficulties, arising from the unsettled  
state



state of the world, from the fierceness and animosity of hostile and divided nations? The power of God, no doubt, could have surmounted all these obstacles: But it is observable, that this power is never exerted but on the most necessary occasions. The Almighty seldom effects, by supernatural means, any thing which could have been accomplished by such as are natural. Were we to judge by maxims merely human, the propagation of Christianity, in those circumstances, would have proved not only a dangerous, but an impossible enterprize.

BUT, favoured by the union and tranquillity of the *Roman* empire, the disciples of Christ executed their commission to great advantage. The success and rapidity with which they diffused the knowledge of his name over the world are astonishing. The epistle to the *Colossians* was written about thirty years after our Saviour's ascension; and, even then, the Apostle could assert, that the Gospel had been *preached*

*to every creature which is under heaven* \*, i. e. through the whole extent of the *Roman* empire. Nations were then accessible, which formerly had been unknown. Under this situation, into which the Providence of God had brought the world, the *joyful sound*, in a few years, reached those remote corners of the earth into which it could not, otherwise, have penetrated for many ages.

THIS view of our subject presents to us an idea of the Christian religion, equal to the greatest and most magnificent conception of the human mind. The noblest people, that ever entered upon the stage of the world, appear to have been only instruments in the divine hand, for the execution of wise purposes concealed from themselves. The *Roman* ambition and bravery paved the way, and prepared the world for the reception of the Christian doctrine: They fought and conquered, that

that it might triumph with greater ease. *Howbeit, they meant not so, neither did their heart think so; but it was in their heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few* \*. By means of their victories, the over-ruling wisdom of God established an empire, that really possesses the perpetuity and eternal duration, which they vainly arrogated to their own: He erected *a throne which shall continue for ever* †; and of the increase of that government there shall be no end ‡.

III. LET us consider the state of the world, with regard to morals. We cannot expect to find pure and undefiled virtue among those people who were destitute of the instructions, the promises, and assistance of divine revelation. Unenlightened reason often errs: Undirected virtue frequently deviates from the right path. But, even in those less favoured ages, righteousness

\* Isa. x. 7.

† Heb. i. 8.

‡ Isa. ix. 7.



ness had not altogether *perished from the earth* ; and the nations which had not the law did by nature the things contained in the law \*. The virtuous but feeble efforts of the human mind were encouraged and seconded by several happy circumstances in the situation of the world, owing in appearance to the sagacity of men, but ordained in reality by the wisdom of God. One of these was of a singular nature, and well deserves our particular attention.

WE have already mentioned the early division of the world into small independent states. These states, uncorrupted by the refinements of luxury, and animated with the noblest of human passions, struggled for liberty, and obtained it. Lawgivers, intimately acquainted with human nature, deep politicians, and lovers of mankind, arose in different places, and founded those equal and happy governments, which have been the admiration and envy of all succeeding ages.

\* Rom. ii. 14.



ages. Temperance, frugality, decency, public spirit, love to their fellow citizens, magnanimity, were the virtues which flourished under such wise institutions. At the same time, in those small commonwealths, the conduct of every citizen was subjected to the eye of the magistrate, and the nature of the government obliged him to inspect their manners with severity. The smallest crimes could not escape observation : Even dangerous virtues were exposed to censure. On this foundation of public liberty did ancient virtue rest ; an effect of government little known in modern times, wherein the views of legislators are confined to inferior objects. But from this source were derived all those splendid actions among the heathens, which, on the one hand, have been so invidiously displayed by infidels, as a reproach to our holy religion, and, on the other, so justly celebrated by Christians, in order to rouse the zeal and emulation of a degenerate age.

VIRTUE,

VIRTUE, however, did not long enjoy this temporary and precarious support. Those wise institutions were the works of men, and, like their authors, subject to decay. Some of them perished by the malignity of internal diseases ; and, if a vigorous constitution, or more skilful management, prolonged the period of others, they yielded at last to the violence of external injuries. It was impossible either to divert or resist the torrent of *Roman* power. It gathered strength from opposition, and bore down all nations before it : But, by subduing the world, the *Romans* lost their own liberty. Many causes, which it is not our present business to explain, concurred in producing this effect : Many vices, engendered or nourished by prosperity, delivered them over to the vilest race of tyrants that ever afflicted or disgraced human nature.

THE alliance between morals and government was now broken ; an influence hitherto so friendly to virtue, became altogether

gether malignant, and was exerted, with most fatal effect, to poison and debase the human mind. Together with despotic power, entered all those odious vices, which are usually found in its train; and, in a short time, they grew to an incredible pitch. The colours are not too strong, which the Apostle employs in drawing the character of that age: Contemporary historians justify him, when he describes it *to be alienated from the life of God, walking in vanity through blindness of mind; to be past feeling, given up to lasciviousness, and to work all uncleanness with greediness* \*.

IN this time of universal corruption, did the wisdom of God manifest the Christian revelation to the world, not to re-establish virtue upon the same insecure foundation of civil government, but to erect it upon the eternal and immoveable basis of a religion, which teacheth righteousness by the  
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\* Ephes. iv. 17, 18, 19.



authority of God. What the wisdom of men could do for the encouragement of virtue in a corrupt world, had been tried during several ages ; and all human devices were found, by experience, to be of very small avail : No juncture, then, could be more proper for publishing a religion, which, independent on human laws and institutions, explains the principles of morals with admirable perspicuity, and enforces the practice of them by most persuasive arguments. Had not Christianity appeared to check and to mitigate the pernicious effects of despotic unlimited empire, it is hard to say how far they might have gone towards extinguishing the name and exercise of virtue among men. This we know, that, in a most dissolute age, and under the worst government, the primitive Christians attained to an eminence in every virtue, of which there is no example in the history of mankind. The spirit of their religion, superior to the corrupt genius of the age, continued pure and vigorous ; and men saw

saw with admiration, that, when every other foundation of virtue was overthrown, *the foundation of God stood sure, immoveable amidst the floods which came, the rains that descended, and the winds that blew and beat upon it* \*.

IV. LET us consider the world with regard to its religious state. The national character of the Jews seems to have been deeply tinged with superstition. Their early education in *Egypt*, the example of neighbouring nations, the influence of the climate, but, above all, the perverseness of their own disposition, rendered this impression indelible. Obstinately resisting all the endeavours employed by the divine Lawgiver to repress or to extirpate it, this superstitious spirit broke out on every occasion. Delighted with the ceremonial prescriptions of the law, the Jews utterly neglected the moral : And, fond of such rites as please

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\* Matth. viii. 25.

the imagination, they undervalued those duties which improve the heart. This unhappy bias was greatly increased by the doctrine of the Pharisees, which reduced the prejudices of their countrymen into a regular system of superstition. By their vain traditions, they added to the load of ceremonies : By their wretched interpretations of the law, they abridged the number of moral precepts. They openly preferred the former before the latter ; and substituted observances frivolous and insignificant, in the place of *the weighty matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith* \*.

WHILE the Pharisees undermined religion on one hand, their rivals the Sadducees carried on a more bold and impious attack against it, from another quarter. By denying the immortality of the soul, they wounded religion in a vital part ; and overturned the doctrine of future rewards and punishments, which hath been, and must ever be, the chief foundation of virtuous

\* Matth. xxiii. 23.



tuous obedience. The practice of these two contending sects was perfectly suitable to their principles. The followers of the one were scandalous libertines ; the disciples of the other, notorious hypocrites : and, between them, the knowledge as well as power of true religion were entirely destroyed. It was high time then for the wisdom of God to vindicate his injured law, and to revive languishing and decayed religion, among his ancient people. To recal the Jews from their former wanderings, the Almighty had with success employed the ministry of his holy Prophets : But the malignant distempers of that age would not have yielded to any common remedy : A conceited and perverse generation would have listened to no inferior messenger ; and, therefore, the great Prophet was sent forth in due time to explain, to extend, and to perfect the law, *and to fill Zion with judgment and righteousness* \*.

BUT

\* Isa. xxxiii. 5.

BUT the deplorable situation of the heathen world with regard to religion, called still more loudly for an immediate interposition of the divine hand. I shall not mention the characters of the heathen deities, infamous for the most enormous crimes; nor describe their religious worship, consisting frequently in the vilest and most shameful rites. Certain it is, the more any man honoured such gods, the worse he himself was; and the oftener he served them, the more wicked he would become.

The spirit and genius of heathenism, according to the Apostle's observation, were *in all things too much superstitious* \*. State-ly temples, expensive sacrifices, pompous ceremonies, magnificent festivals, with all the other circumstances of shew and splendour, were the objects which false religion presented to its votaries: But just notions of God, obedience to his moral laws, pu-  
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\* Acts xvii, 23.

rity of heart, and sanctity of life, were not  
 once mentioned as ingredients in religious  
 service. Superstition never prevailed a-  
 mong any people, but at the expence of  
 morals. The heathen superstition, far  
 from giving any aid to virtue, seems not to  
 have had the least connection with it. No  
 repentance of past crimes, no future a-  
 mendment of conduct, are ever prescribed  
 by it, as proper means of appeasing their  
 offended deities. "Sacrifice a chosen vic-  
 tim ; bow down before an hallowed image ;  
 be initiated in the sacred mysteries ; and the  
 wrath of the Gods shall be averted, and  
 the thunder shall drop from their hands."  
 Suitable to these sentiments is the beha-  
 viour of *Balak* King of *Moab*, described by  
 the Prophet *Micah*. That Prince had pro-  
 voked the God of *Israel* ; and, in order to  
 regain his favour, thought of the same  
 means, which superstition employs to miti-  
 gate the rage of its false Gods. *Where-*  
*with (says he) shall I come before the Lord,*  
*and bow myself before the high God ? Shall*



*I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul \*. To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God, were acceptable services, which made no part in the system of heathen religion.*

HAPPILY the wisdom and simplicity of ancient government checked the progress of this infectious principle, and corrected, in some degree, its poisonous and destructive qualities. But, no sooner had the tyranny of the Roman Emperors removed this restraint, by subverting liberty, than superstition made its advances on the world by sudden and mighty steps, and exercised an uncontrolled dominion in every corner of the earth. Tyranny and superstition, like those other destroyers of mankind, famine and pestilence, are nearly allied. Superstition

\* Micah, vi. 6. 7. 8.

perstition breaks the spirit, and prepares it for servitude. Tyranny, for this reason, encourages superstition, and employs it as an useful auxiliary to illegal power. Accordingly, Rome adopted the Gods of almost every nation which she had conquered, and opened her temples to the grossest superstitions of the most barbarous people. *Her foolish heart being darkened, she changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds and four-footed beasts, and creeping things \**.

AT this time, therefore, did a good God, in pity to his deluded creatures, publish the Christian revelation. By it, the God of truth was made known; *and the idols of the nations were moved at his presence †*. Rational and sublime in its doctrines, humane and beneficent in its precepts, pure and simple in its worship; Christianity was better calculated, than any other religion,

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\* Rom. i. 21. 22. 23.

† Isa. xix. 1.

to repress the inroads of superstition, and to establish an acceptable and manly devotion, consisting *in spirit and in truth* \*. No period can be mentioned, when instruction in these important articles would have been more seasonable or necessary. The absurd fictions, and abominable practices of superstition, had gone near to extinguish the natural sentiments of the human mind, concerning the supreme Being, and to banish his name and worship from the earth. No wonder men, under these circumstances, should listen with joy to the Christian revelation, which delivered them from that hateful yoke, and taught them *to serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him* †.

V. LET us consider the world with regard to its domestic situation ; a view, perhaps, less extensive and magnificent than those which hitherto have engaged our attention ;

\* John iv. 24.

† Luke i. 74.



tention ; but not less important. The private and domestic situation of mankind is the chief circumstance which forms their character, and becomes the great source of their happiness or misery. Any poison in this fountain communicates itself to the manners of men ; any bitterness there infects all the pleasures of life. Many circumstances, of the most fatal influence on domestic virtue and happiness, occur to attentive observers of the period under review.

DOMESTIC society is founded in the union between husband and wife. Among all civilized nations, this union hath been esteemed sacred and honourable ; and from it are derived exquisite joys, which heighten all the pleasures, and alleviate all the pains, in human life. In the ancient world, there prevailed two practices equally pernicious to the peace and happiness of the married state. From the most early times, polygamy seems to have been universal amongst the eastern nations ; and

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men married as many wives as their fancy wished for, or their fortune could maintain. Now, this practice not only appears to be contrary to the intention of the Almighty, who at first created but one person of each sex, and hath since preserved an admirable proportion between the number of males and females whom he sends into the world ; but by it, likewise, were banished from domestic life all those enjoyments which sweeten and endear it. Friendship, social intercourse, confidence, and the mutual care of children, were in a great measure unknown : On the one hand, rigour, voluptuousness, jealousy ; on the other, subjection without love, fidelity, or virtue. One half of the human species became the property of the other ; and the husband, instead of being the friend and protector of a wife, was no better than the master and tyrant over a slave. The envy and discord which were introduced into the families of *Jacob* and *Elkanah*, by a plurality of wives, are but imperfect pictures of the enormities

ties occasioned by the same practice, under masters less virtuous, and in ages more dissolute and luxurious. Wherever the Christian religion is established, an end hath been put to an institution so inconsistent with the felicity of domestic life. Marriage, suitable to the ordinance of God, is rendered a friendly and indissoluble alliance between two persons : And tranquillity, confidence, and joy, bless an union begun and cemented by mutual love.

IN the western parts of the world, the maxims with regard to marriage were more conformable to nature : One man was confined to one woman : But, at the same time, their laws allowed a practice, which introduced the most fatal disorders into domestic life. The Almighty, *because of the hardness of their hearts*, permitted the Jews, on certain occasions, *to give a writing of divorcement to their wives* \*. According to their usual custom, the Jews stretched

\* Mark x. 4. 5.



stretched this indulgence to most extravagant lengths ; and, defining the cases in which they pretended divorces to be lawful, with a minute and over-curious nicety, they altogether perverted the institution of God. Their Doctors permitted divorces for causes so trivial and ridiculous, as cannot be mentioned in a grave discourse. The utmost dissolution of manners was the effect of such licentious opinions : And our Saviour found the abuses to be grown so enormous, as to render the strictest and most precise limitations of the *Mosaic* precept absolutely necessary.

NOR was this matter on any better footing among the heathen nations. Divorces, on very slight pretences, were permitted both by the *Greek* and *Roman* legislators. And, though the pure manners of those republics restrained, for some time, the operation of such a pernicious institution ; though the virtue of private persons seldom abused the indulgence which the laws allowed them : Yet, no sooner had the progress

gress of luxury, and the establishment of despotic power, vitiated the taste of men, than the law with regard to divorces was found to be among the worst corruptions which prevailed in that abandoned age. The facility of separation rendered married persons careless of obtaining or practising those virtues which render domestic life tranquil and delightful. The education of children was neglected by parents, who often met together with a scheme of separation in both their thoughts. Marriage, instead of restraining, added to the violence of irregular desire; and, under a legal name, became the vilest and most shameless prostitution. From all these causes, the married state fell into disreputation and contempt; and it became necessary to force men, by penal laws, into a society where they expected no secure or lasting happiness. Among the *Romans*, domestic corruption grew, of a sudden, to an incredible height; and perhaps, in the history of mankind, we can find no parallel to the  
undisguised

undisguised impurity and licentiousness of that age \*. It was in a good time, therefore, that our Saviour abolished a practice, which had been one of the most fertile sources of those disorders. The bonds of the marriage-union were rendered, by him, almost indissoluble ; and the *cords of love* were drawn as close as possible. Political projectors may please themselves with imaginary advantages, resulting from the liberty of divorces ; but reason, as well as the experience of mankind, justify the wisdom of the divine decree concerning them. If the manners of men be not extremely pure and simple, the least indulgence in this article hath always proved fatal to the peace and virtue of domestic life ; and, whatever remains of these we now find in a dissolute age, must be entirely ascribed to that regulation in the gospel †, which superficial reasoners represent as a grievance, though it be in truth the greatest blessing to mankind.

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\* Rom. i. 26. &c.

† Matth. v. 32.



If the lives of those, who are at the head of domestic society, needed reformation, the sufferings of those who were subject to them merited relief.

So many are the wants of human society, that far the greater part of mankind is condemned to constant toil and labour, in order to supply them. In the ancient world, the condition of this numerous and useful race of men differed widely from that wherein they are now placed. They were not freemen, but slaves, who then occupied the inferior, though necessary, station in human life. Their labour was not a voluntary duty to the society, which entitled them to a reward; it was an hard task, imposed without their consent, and exacted with the utmost rigour. The number of persons, reduced to this unhappy condition, was immense. In those parts of the world, the history and situation of which are best known, above two thirds of all the inhabitants are computed to have been in a state of slavery. The persons, the goods, the

the children of these slaves were the property of their masters, disposed of at pleasure, and transferred, like any other possession, from one owner to another. No inequality of condition, no superiority in power, no pretext of consent, can justify this ignominious depression of human nature, or can confer upon one man the right of dominion over the person of another : But, not only doth reason condemn this institution as unjust ; experience proved it to be pernicious both to masters and slaves. The elevation of the former inspired them with pride, insolence, impatience, cruelty, and voluptuousness : The dependent and hopeless state of the latter dejected the human mind, and extinguished every generous and noble sentiment in the heart. Were I to mention the laws and regulations of the most civilized states among the ancients, concerning those unfortunate sufferers ; were I to relate the treatment which they met with, from persons the most renowned for their virtue ;

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maxims so inhumane, and actions so barbarous, would excite the strongest pity and indignation, in an age which never beheld the tyranny of the oppressor, nor heard the groans of the captive.

It is true, while men enjoyed those wise institutions of government, which we formerly described, the state of servitude did not become altogether intolerable; many expedients were used for mitigating the rigour of command, and lightening the yoke of obedience: But, upon establishing despotic government in the *Roman Empire*, domestic tyranny rose, in a short time, to an astonishing height. In that rank soil, every vice, which power nourishes in the great, or oppression engenders in the mean, thrived, and grew up apace.

HERE, then, is an object worthy the attention of that merciful God, *who delivereth the soul of the afflicted from violence, who heareth the cry of the needy, and him who hath no helper* \*. The groans of

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\* Psalms, lxxii. 12.



such an innumerable multitude of his reasonable creatures, bereaved of the noblest privileges of their nature, liberty and independence, would not, we may believe, be uttered in vain. He could not always *keep silence, and be still*, when he beheld their wretched situation, so destructive of happiness, and so fatal to virtue. At last, the divine wisdom interposed; and, when the evil had become intolerable, and seemed to be past cure, the promulgation of Christianity brought an effectual and timely remedy.

It is not the authority of any single detached precept in the gospel, but the spirit and genius of Christian religion, more powerful than any particular command, which hath abolished the practice of slavery through the world. The temper, which Christianity inspired, was mild and gentle; and the doctrines it taught added such dignity and lustre to human nature, as rescued it from the dishonourable servitude into which it was sunk. All men, of every condition,

dition, are declared to be the offspring of the same God, and the heirs of the same heavenly inheritance : One Saviour redeemed them from iniquity by his death, and one spirit worketh powerfully in their hearts. Where-ever such opinions prevail, no human creature can be regarded as altogether insignificant and vile ; even the meanest acquire dignity ; exterior distinctions disappear ; and men approach nearer to that original equality, in which they were at first placed, and are still viewed by their Creator.

WHAT a wonderful and blessed change hath Christianity produced in the face of the world ! Together with the knowledge of its precepts, liberty, humanity, and domestic happiness, diffused themselves over every corner of the earth. It is deemed a virtue to admire and to praise those illustrious personages who delivered mankind from the rage of tyrants, and vindicated the violated laws and constitution of their country : And is no admiration due to the generous  
spirit

spirit of that religion, which restored liberty, not to one nation or society alone, but rescued from the worst servitude, far the greater number of the human race, and acquired for them that happy freedom, which they still enjoy \* ? When we behold Christianity making its progress through the world, and working, every where, such an important alteration in the condition of mankind ; we may well apply to a temporal deliverance, what the Prophet spoke concerning a spiritual salvation : *Behold the acceptable year of the Lord is come ! Liberty is proclaimed to the captive, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound ;*  
*they*

\* The permission of slavery in our *American colonies*, is a specious, not a real objection against the reasoning under this head. The genius and tendency of any religion are known by the operations of its vigorous, not of its declining age. If, in a degenerate world, avarice hath revived an institution which Christianity had utterly abolished ; this, like many other vices which prevail among Christians, must be charged upon the corruption of the human heart, not upon that religion which testifies against it.



*they shall rest from their sorrow, and from their fear, and from the hard bondage wherein they were made to serve* \*.

THE abolition of domestic slavery was the occasion of another change in the manners of men, which is no less remarkable. Captives taken in war were, in all probability, the first persons subjected to perpetual servitude: And, when the necessities or luxuries of mankind increased the demand for slaves, every new war recruited their number, by reducing the vanquished to that wretched condition. Hence proceeded the fierce and desperate spirit, with which wars were carried on among ancient nations. While chains and slavery were the certain lot of the conquered, battles were fought, and towns defended, with rage and obstinacy, which nothing but horror at such a fate could have inspired: But, by putting an end to the cruel institution of slavery, Christianity extended its mild

\* Isaiah, lxi. 1. ; xiv. 3.

mild influence to the practice of war ; and that barbarous art, softened by its humane spirit, ceased to be so destructive. Secure, in every event, of personal liberty, the vanquished resisted with less obstinacy, and the triumph of the victor became less cruel. Thus, humanity was introduced into the exercise of war, with which it appears to be almost incompatible ; and it is to the merciful maxims of Christianity, much more than to any other cause, that we must ascribe the little ferocity and bloodshed which accompany modern victories. Even where the passions of men are fiercest, and most highly inflamed, the powerful genius of our religion interposes, restrains the fury of war, and sets bounds to its destroying rage. The benevolent spirit of the gospel delivereth the captive from his fetters, *looseth those who were appointed to death\**, and saith to the sword that is ready to devour, *Return to thy scabbard, and be still* †.

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\* Psal. cii. 20.

† Jer. xlvil. 7.

It hath become a fashionable topic among political reasoners to celebrate the mildness and humanity of modern manners, and to prefer the character of present times, in that respect, before the ancient. To what cause shall we ascribe this important revolution in the sentiments and dispositions of mankind? Not to the influence of better instituted governments; for in legislative wisdom the ancients far excelled us: Not to the effects of a better-directed education; that duty, shamefully neglected by us, was among them an object of chief attention: Not to our superior refinements in elegant and polite arts; there we must be content to equal, without pretending to surpass, the ancients. The Christian religion, *hid from ages, but now manifested to the world*, is the only cause capable of producing so great an effect. *That wisdom which is from above is pure and peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy\**. Genuine Christianity is distinguished

\* Jam. iii. 17.



distinguished above all other religions, by the mildness of its spirit : The enemy of every practice which hardens the heart : The encourager of every virtue which renders the character humane. Where-ever it hath been established in purity, and practised with zeal, *kindness, long-suffering, meekness, charity* \*, are the graces which accompany it. Even the vices and inventions of men, which have mingled themselves with the truths of God, have not been able entirely to destroy their effects. Under all disadvantages, the genius of the gospel exerts itself, civilizing the fiercest and most barbarous nations, and inspiring a gentleness of disposition, unknown to any other religion. Together with the best spiritual blessings, the most valuable temporal mercies have been communicated to the world, by Christianity. It not only sanctifies our souls, but refines our manners ; and, while it gives the promises of the next life,

\* Col. iii. 12.

life, it improves and adorns the present :  
That happy change, which the wisdom of  
man could not effect, God in his good time  
accomplished, by *manifesting to the world  
the mystery hid from ages and generations.*

THESE observations, which we have  
made, suggest many useful reflections, with  
regard to the future and universal propa-  
gation of Christian knowledge. At the  
time when the disciples of Christ set out,  
in obedience to their Lord's command, *to  
teach all nations*, no undertaking could  
appear, in the judgment of man, more wild  
and impracticable. But, beside the bless-  
ing of God, that accompanied them where-  
ever they went, we have discovered several  
circumstances in the situation of the world,  
which contributed powerfully towards the  
success and facility of their enterprize. Aid-  
ed by these, *the word of God increased, and  
the number of disciples multiplied great-  
ly* \*. *The weakness of God became stronger*  
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\* Acts, vi. 7.

*than men ; and in a short time he enabled the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, the weak things of the world to confound the things which are strong, and things that are not, to bring to nought things that are* \*. That the same effectual blessing of God still continueth to second every sincere and vigorous attempt to spread the knowledge of his name, we have good reason to believe. What powerful, unknown causes may co-operate with this blessing of the Almighty, we are not permitted yet to discover. It cannot, however, be more improbable, that the influences of Christianity shall reach farther, than it once was, that they should reach so far. After we have seen the light of the gospel penetrate into so many *dark places of the earth* ; why doth it seem incredible, that its splendour should, at last, fill the world, and scatter the remainder of darkness which covereth the nations ?

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\* 1 Cor. i. 25. 27. 28.



It is obvious to observe one circumstance, which cannot fail of introducing the gospel into distant nations with great advantage. That part of the world, wherein Christianity is established, infinitely surpasses the rest in all the sciences and improvements which raise one nation above another in reputation or power. Of this superiority the *Europeans* have availed themselves to the utmost, in every project for extending their empire or commerce; and have brought a great part of the globe into dependence, either upon their arts or their arms. Now, the same attainments in science or policy, might be employed to good purpose, on the side of religion: And, though hitherto subservient to the designs of interest or ambition, may we not flatter ourselves, that, at last, they shall become noble instruments in the hand of God, for preparing the world to receive the gospel?

THIS glorious prospect may be distant; but it is not imaginary. Even in a degenerate

rate age, zealous and active spirits have arisen, and societies have been formed, upon the generous plan of propagating the knowledge of Christ to nations *far off, which never heard his fame, nor have seen his glory* \*. What they have already done, encourages the most sanguine hopes of farther success. And, if it shall please God to increase the number, and to *strengthen the hands*, of such well-disposed persons; if he shall see fit, to *hasten his time when one shall become a thousand, and a small one strong* †: Then might we expect that *the knowledge of the Lord would fill the earth, as the waters over the sea* ‡; that *the desert would blossom as the rose* §, and *the wilderness become a fruitful field* ||: Then might the spirit of Christianity, which languishes so visibly in those places where it hath long been planted, revive with new vigour in unknown lands, and shine with

\* Isa. lxvi. 19.

† Ibid. lx. 2.

‡ Ibid. xi. 9.

§ Ibid. xxxv. 1.

|| Ibid. xxxii. 15.

with its first splendour, among *the people who now sit in darkness, and in the region and shadow of death* \*. Then might the solitary places rejoice †, the barren break forth into singing ‡, and the tongue of the dumb praise the Lord §.

BUT the conversion of distant nations is not the chief care of the Society for propagating Christian knowledge : An object nearer at hand demands its more immediate attention. The Highlands and Islands of *Scotland* present to us a scene, which we would little expect in a nation where true religion and polished manners have long flourished. There society still appears in a rude and imperfect form : Strangers to industry, averse from labour, inured to rapine ; the fierce inhabitants scorned all the arts of peace, and stood ready for every bold and desperate action. Attached to their own customs, from ignorance and habit,

\* Matth. iv. 16.

† Isa. xxxv. 1.

‡ Ibid. liv. 1.

§ Ibid. xxxv. 6.



bit, they have hitherto continued a separate people : And, though the religion established among them be the same which we enjoy, its progress hath been imperfect ; and the fixed pastors were never able to surmount the disadvantages of their situation, or the obstinacy of their people. In this neglected field, the enemies of our religion and liberty have sown the seeds of the worst superstition, and the most pernicious principles of government.

This field the Society has occupied ; and has endeavoured, by its pious care, to render many of our deluded countrymen good Christians, and useful subjects. Happily for them, they do not labour alone in this noble work. The reformation of the Highlands was never totally neglected by the legislature : But, roused by a recent danger, it hath merited of late more particular attention. Suitable to this view, laws have been enacted with a most humane spirit, in order to retrieve that part of the kingdom from ignorance and barbarism,  
and

and to introduce the same regular government and independence which are the blessings of other *British* subjects. From these salutary laws, the members of the Society expect great assistance in the prosecution of their design.

IN the mean time, they adore the divine goodness which hath opened the hearts of many charitable persons, whose liberality hath put it in their power to carry on their plan with vigour and success; enabling them not only to begin a good work, but in many places to bring it to great perfection. What a reproach will it be to an age, wherein no hand is backward to supply the most extravagant demands of luxury and pleasure, if this generous undertaking shall languish and decay for want of support! The pleasures, after which a giddy generation run, are unworthy to be compared with that sacred joy which fills the heart of a Christian who hath been instrumental in rescuing an immortal soul from vice, in adorning it with virtue, in  
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seasoning it with grace, in manifesting the  
mystery of the gospel to those from whom it  
is hid, and in feeding the hungry with  
the bread of life. If we ourselves have tast-  
ed of the heavenly gift, if we have passed  
from death to life, and have not only heard  
the sound, but felt the power of the gos-  
pel; the greater will be our zeal in com-  
municating the same glad tidings to others,  
that they also may be persuaded to fly for  
refuge to the consolations which are in  
Christ: If honour to our blessed Redeemer  
be the leading principle in our hearts, we  
will never rest satisfied, until his glory fill the  
earth, and every knee bow to his sacred name.  
By endeavouring thus to bless others, we  
shall draw down the divine blessing up-  
on ourselves. *They that be wise shall shine  
as the brightness of the firmament; and they  
that turn many to righteousness, as the stars  
for ever and ever\*.*

\* Dan. xii. 13.



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